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Introduction

Though the genre of the Gothic romance clearly owes its name to the subtitle of *The Castle of Otranto*'s second edition, 'A Gothic Story', the elevation of Walpole's work to the status of an origin has served to grant an illusory stability to a body of fiction which is distinctly heterogeneous. Face-value readings of the preface to *Otranto*'s second edition have encouraged the idea that Walpole issued a manifesto for a new literary genre, the emergence of which was coincident with a revival of imagination in an era that privileged rationality. As I will argue, however, any categorization of the Gothic as a continuous tradition, with a generic significance, is unable to do justice to the diversity of the romances which are now accommodated under the 'Gothic' label, and liable to overlook the often antagonistic relations that existed between different works or writers. The project of this book is to reconsider the so-called Gothic romance from a historical perspective, and to focus in detail on the functioning of specific works, so as to provide the basis for a more nuanced account of the way that the genre was constituted in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

A historically grounded study of Gothic fiction must begin by acknowledging that the genre itself is a relatively modern construct. The Gothic romance as a descriptive category is the product of twentieth-century literary criticism, and specifically of the revival of interest in late-eighteenth-century romance in the 1920s and 1930s. If it is difficult to be certain as to why there was a surge of interest in writers such as Walpole, Radcliffe, and Lewis in this period, it is nonetheless important to recognize the influence of the works that initially labelled and described 'Gothic' fiction, such as Edith Birkhead's *The Tale of Terror* (1921), Eino Railo's *The Haunted Castle* (1927), J. M. S. Tompkins's *The Popular Novel in England 1770–1800* (1932) and Montague Summers's *The Gothic Quest* (1938). Though these writers often appealed to the aura of romance in a defensive tone, their labelling of the Gothic supplied the

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initial foundation for subsequent critics to make larger claims about the importance of the genre as a whole. Arguably the most powerful exploration of the significance of the Gothic has been provided by David Punter's groundbreaking study *The Literature of Terror* (1980). Punter reads the Gothic as a materialist genre, a literature of self-analysis which emerged at a stage 'when the bourgeoisie . . . began to try to understand the conditions and history of their own ascent'.[1] In a period of industrialization and rapid social change, according to Punter, Gothic works insistently betrayed the fears and anxieties of the middle classes about the nature of their ascendancy, returning to the issues of ancestry, inheritance, and the transmission of property: 'Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising to find the emergence of a literature whose key motifs are paranoia, manipulation and injustice, and whose central project is understanding the inexplicable, the taboo, the irrational.'[2]

Following Punter, many critics have invoked models of generic tradition in order to support sometimes expansive claims about the nature of the anxieties disclosed by the Gothic. It is important to remain sceptical about the explanatory power of such theories of the Gothic, however, since they are liable to become reliant upon a 'hermeneutically circular process' whereby, in the words of Jacqueline Howard, individual works are interpreted 'in such a way as to produce the generic frame against which [they are] being read'.[3] The term 'Gothic', as Chris Baldick has stated, is now established 'as the name for one sinister corner of the modern western imagination',[4] and this increasingly dominant sense of the Gothic, chiming as it does with the postmodern suspicion of Enlightenment values, continues to exert a powerful influence on those approaching eighteenth-century Gothic fiction for the first time. Yet despite the resonance of the Gothic as a metaphor, and the privileged access to repressed material which Gothic works are now seen to offer, it is also important to take into account the range of literal meanings which the term held in the late eighteenth century, and to recognize in particular the way that the Gothic was constructed as an idealized pseudo-historical period or a locus of exemplary virtue and valour. Only a small number of romances after *Otranto* actually characterized themselves as 'Gothic' works,[5] but it is difficult to incorporate these into an account of an interrogative, 'bourgeois' genre. If the past exerts a coercive force on the present in Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron: A Gothic Story* (1778), for example, it does so in order to redeem the aristocratic family at the centre of the work, and to stress the

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legitimacy of its hero's status as the nobly born heir to the Castle of Lovel. Reeve subordinated the role of sensation or suspense to a didactic purpose, as I will go on to argue, yet her work has been dismissed and virtually ignored because of its failure to live up to a normative critical standard of what a Gothic romance should look like. At the outset, therefore, it is important to underline the fact that the unitary genre upon which many readings of the Gothic rely is a twentieth-century creation. Though the description of genres, movements, and traditions serves an important purpose in literary history, this must be accompanied by a focus on the consequences of such acts of definition, and literary criticism must be sensitive to the more nuanced kinds of classification that were made by writers and readers of the Gothic romance in its historical moment.

Most of the works which literary history has classified as 'Gothic' actually described themselves by way of the larger category of 'romance', a term given prominence in the period by the expansion of scholarly research into the question of national and cultural origins. What we now know as the Gothic, according to Ian Duncan, was 'the first English prose fiction to call itself "romance" with a certain generic intention, distinguishing itself from the novel and the representation of contemporary life'.[6] Though many accounts of the genre's emergence, encouraged by Walpole's second preface, have read *Otranto* as an empowering fictional manifesto, it is nonetheless difficult to isolate a *single* 'generic intention' underwriting the rise of the Gothic romance. The status of the Gothic as an assimilative literary hybrid was foregrounded even at its acknowledged point of origin, indeed, when Walpole claimed that *Otranto* was a '*blend* [of] the two kinds of Romance, the ancient and the modern' (my emphasis).[7] This book will be less interested in trying to define the parameters and preoccupations of the genre as a whole, therefore, than to locate the Gothic in the context of the revival of romance in the second half of the eighteenth century. The history of prose fiction in this period, as Katie Trumpener has recently argued, is one of 'dislocations, bifurcations, and disengagements as much as it is of continuity and accretion', a history whose 'complex dynamic of development' necessitates both local and relational analysis.[8] In the light of this claim, I want to explore some of the connections between the Gothic and other forms of contemporary fiction, and examine neglected as well as canonical works, in order to assess the diverse range of possibilities which the category of romance offered to various Gothic works and their writers.

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The Gothic romance, as Gary Kelly has stated, 'was not so much a coherent and authentic genre as an ensemble of themes and formal elements which could be taken over and adapted in whole or in part by other novelists and writers'.[9] While *The Castle of Otranto* clearly helped to establish the vocabulary of character-types and plot motifs which later writers exploited, it is nonetheless important – despite the superficial similarities between subsequent Gothic works – to be aware of the different ways in which these common elements were deployed. Though it is the self-described 'literary offspring' of *Otranto*, *The Old English Baron*, for example, significantly rewrote Walpole's work: by setting its action in England, rather than Mediterranean Europe, by toning down the extravagance of *Otranto*'s supernatural machinery, and by restoring its hero to his true aristocratic status and to the seat of his ancestors, Reeve's work, as I will go on to argue, offered an earnest moral fable rather than a frivolous claim on the attention of the leisured reader.[10] Just as it is important to recognize the differences in meaning between various deployments of a 'Gothic' lexicon, so too is it important to take account of the other diverse materials which such romances assimilated.[11] *The Old English Baron*, for example, not only rewrote *Otranto*, but also displayed its affiliations to the existing genre of the historical romance, exploiting the remoteness of romance in order to appeal to the exemplary value of English medieval history. Other works in the tradition which I will identify as 'Loyalist Gothic' similarly opted for Samuel Johnson's definition of romance as 'a military fable of the middle ages',[12] whereas a canonical 'Gothic' work such as Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) accentuated the sensationalism of a range of sources, including German ballads and folk-tales, and offered a daring or rebellious ideal of authorship. Ann Radcliffe, by contrast, privileged the 'feminine' (but not necessarily feminist) associations of romance, in order to reward her heroines with an idyllic refuge from the threats posed by the outside world; more than any other 'Gothic' writer, she sought to dignify or elevate romance by subsuming elements of higher literary genres, and appealing to the prestigious discourse of aesthetics. As I will finally argue, this project of legitimizing the romance for a larger audience was continued and extended, in turn, by Walter Scott's Waverley novels, synthesizing romance and history in order to create a further literary hybrid.

One way of explaining the diversity of what we now know as Gothic fiction, as I have suggested above, is to look at the manner in which certain works both appealed to the vocabulary of the genre and defined

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the possibilities offered by the characteristic historical and/or geographical otherness of romance. This focus on different constructions of the potential provided by the 'Gothic' lexicon and by the remoteness of romance must then be complemented by an examination of the ways in which contemporary critics and reviewers themselves discriminated between Gothic works. 'Terror' or 'Terrorist' fiction began to be loosely classified towards the end of the 1790s,[13] and along with Jane Austen's famous parody *Northanger Abbey* (written in the late 1790s), a number of 'recipe satires' in the period defined such fiction in terms of an easily repeated set of conventions and devices. This characterization has been held up by literary critics throughout the twentieth century as evidence that the Gothic romance was a monolithic genre: 'a standardized, absolutely formulaic system of creating a certain kind of atmosphere in which a reader's sensibility toward fear and horror is exercised in predictable ways'.[14] Contemporary summaries of romance ingredients were never simply descriptive, however, since readings of the sameness of Gothic fiction, and attacks on commercial publishers such as the Minerva Press, were always motivated by much larger concerns about the regulation of cultural production and the disciplining of readers – especially women and the lower classes. Numerous critics dismissed the modern romance as a whole, of course, and writers were often condemned for pandering to a debased popular appetite, yet many reviewers who were able to devote space to the discussion of individual works also drew more nuanced distinctions between different romances, and recognized concerns and priorities that extended beyond the desire to generate fear and horror. While some form of supernatural agency was regarded as an essential component of terror-fiction by contemporary satirists, most critics who considered individual works at any length nonetheless understood that different treatments of the supernatural varied greatly in terms of their tone and register. Late-eighteenth-century writers generally acknowledged the frivolity of the pantomime-style arms and armour in *The Castle of Otranto*, for example, and Walpole's romance was indeed associated as often with the *Arabian Nights*, or the tales of Count Anthony Hamilton, as it was with other canonical Gothic works. Critics and reviewers of *The Monk*, a work most famous for its representation of Satan, inferred that Lewis was primarily concerned to establish a reputation as an *enfant terrible* in the literary field. Ann Radcliffe's romances, by contrast, were much more frequently discussed in the context of suspense techniques, but they were exempted from the stigma of mass-production that satirists attached to most other

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contemporary productions; conservative critics seized upon what they found congenial in Radcliffe's work, such as its rationalization of the supernatural, and regularly made the claim that Radcliffe was the founder of her own 'school' of romance.

The dual focus on the motivation and reception of individual works, outlined above, enables the modern reader to appreciate that 'Gothic' fiction was far less a tradition with a generic identity and significance than a domain which was open to contest from the first, constituted or structured by the often antagonistic relations between different writers and works. The individual chapters of this book will substantiate this claim by offering detailed case studies of specific authors, works, and publishing phenomena, and by addressing along the way some of the established views about the status of the Gothic as an interrogative or transgressive genre. Following the historical method advanced by Jerome McGann, I assume that all of the novels and romances which I discuss have 'two interlocking histories': 'one that derives from the author's expressed decisions and purposes, and the other that derives from the critical reactions of the [work's] various readers'.[15] By remaining alert to the fact that writers such as Walpole, Reeve, Lewis, and Radcliffe had different agendas, and by paying attention to the subsequent reception and functioning of their works, the chapters which follow will approach the relations between these writers and works from a historical perspective, so as to provide the basis for a more rigorous account of the Gothic romance as a contested social space.

A revisionist account of the Gothic genre must begin, as almost every critical study of the Gothic does, by considering the status of *The Castle of Otranto*. In order to counter the reputation which *Otranto* has acquired as a work which heralded the eruption of 'unreason', my first chapter locates Walpole's romance in the context of the 'aristocratic' identity that he sought to construct by way of all his diverse works and projects. As I argue with initial reference to the eclecticism of Strawberry Hill, Walpole resorted to the category of Gothic as a means of stating his privileged ability to amuse himself however he chose. The eccentricity of *Otranto*, in turn, similarly needs to be viewed in the light of Walpole's apparently overriding concern with maintaining a non-accountable position in the field of cultural production. Though Walpole's two prefaces framed *Otranto* in a seemingly defensive way, there is little other evidence to suggest that he was anxious about the immediate reception of his romance. Instead, as I argue, Walpole presented *Otranto* as a source of absurd and extravagant novelty, which was calculated both to

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amuse a leisured audience and mystify those uninitiated readers without the necessary powers of discrimination to appreciate the nature of the work's invention. My reading of *Otranto* is substantiated by a focus on the different claims that Walpole made about the work, especially in his correspondence, and by a discussion of Walpole's other works in the period, which similarly revelled in the mechanics of deception. This description of Walpole's 'position-taking' is complemented, in turn, by a focus on the way that *Otranto* was read and reviewed, both by its initial audience and by critics writing later in the century. Several recent critics have read Walpole's romance as an allegory of class-relations and historical nemesis, but writers in the late eighteenth century – whatever they thought of the work – almost unanimously acknowledged *Otranto*'s status as a frivolous diversion. Though *Otranto* continues to be credited as the origin of terror-fiction, therefore, Walpole's contemporaries recognized that his construction of 'fancy' and 'imagination' was a class-specific one, and they largely rewarded him with the distinction which he sought.

This reading of Walpolean frivolity was endorsed by the first work to present itself as an imitation of *Otranto*, Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron*. Despite her claim to have 'written upon the same plan' as Walpole, however, Reeve – as I have already indicated – defined the possibilities of romance and the Gothic in a markedly different way. My second chapter claims that Reeve's work was the forerunner of what I term the 'Loyalist Gothic' romance, a critically neglected yet significant line of works which were particularly prominent in the 1790s and early 1800s. From around the time of the British defeat in America, as I explain in detail, the category of Gothic was widely redefined so as to denote a proud heritage of military victory. In the context of this increasingly powerful loyalist discourse, I argue that the majority of works after *Otranto* which called themselves 'Gothic', along with numerous other 'historical' romances, served an unambiguous moral and patriotic agenda. These little-known works rely upon an English medieval setting, and locate their action in and around a real castle, identified primarily as the symbol of a stratified yet harmonious society. Loyalist Gothic romances refer to real historical figures from the pantheon of British patriotism, and depict the defeat of dubiously effeminate or foreign villains. Most importantly, such works privilege the didactic potential of romance, and allow the supernatural only the benign role of punishing usurpers and restoring the property claims of rightful heirs. Though Loyalist Gothic romances are in effect

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structurally bound to describe an act of usurpation, therefore, this act is nearly always presented as a *fait accompli*, and such works concentrate instead on the purging of corruption, staging the providentially inspired process by which legitimate hierarchies are re-established.

Despite the aura of subversion that still surrounds the genre as a whole, nearly all of the romances which actually called themselves 'Gothic' were unambiguously conservative. My third chapter proceeds from this finding in order to investigate the historical basis for the perceived notoriety of the Gothic romance, outlining some of the reasons why certain works were condemned so violently. In general, it is fair to say that the majority of critics in the period found the content of specific novels and romances to be far less important in itself than the 'context' of their production and reception. Works that described themselves as translations or imitations of German fiction were seen to be increasingly suspect as the 1790s progressed, since anything 'German' was guilty by association with the deluded revolutionary idealism attributed to the Illuminati, or to writers such as Schiller and Kotzebue. The escapist fiction published by commercial presses, such as William Lane's Minerva, was widely censured, in addition, because of the way that it was seen to feed the demand of an undisciplined yet ever-expanding reading public. In the light of this focus on the supposed effects of prose fiction in the 1790s, I consider the reputation of perhaps the most prominently scandalous work in the period, *The Monk*. Lewis's romance is still viewed by many as an archetypally 'Gothic' one, and has often been held up in order to exemplify the transgressive status of the genre as a whole. Yet although *The Monk* was ultimately condemned, like many other works in the period, because of the way that it was seen to 'circulate' so promiscuously among a large and diverse audience, the content and method of Lewis's work were atypical. Focusing on *The Monk*'s usage of source materials and its cynical narratorial commentary, I develop my account of the contested status of the Gothic in the period by describing the way that Lewis defined his work against other current romance paradigms. Lewis eschewed the emphasis on legitimacy and property favoured by the Loyalist Gothic, and amplified the suggestion of impropriety that was only implicit in the work of a writer such as Ann Radcliffe. Even though several works written in the early nineteenth century were clearly affiliated to *The Monk*, it remains difficult to substantiate the view that either Lewis or his work was representative of a larger genre; in a brief discussion of other works by Lewis in the 1790s and early 1800s, I claim instead that he went on to try

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and maintain the profile he had attained with *The Monk*, casually defying critics and reviewers in the process.

Whereas Lewis's work was consistently controversial, the romances of Ann Radcliffe were virtually exempted from criticism altogether. My fourth chapter deals with the specific nature of Radcliffe's popularity, and describes the way in which her work was celebrated by conservative critics for providing a legitimate release or transport from the problems of the present. Radcliffe integrated certain Gothic motifs with both the format of the *Bildungsroman* and the heroine-centred focus of contemporary romances such as Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (1783–5). During her lifetime, Radcliffe was widely praised for the affective power of her work, while – more recently – many critics have concentrated on the way that Radcliffean romance foregrounds the consciousness of the persecuted heroine. Despite the suspense which Radcliffe's work provides, and the obvious interest her romances offer to feminist or psychoanalytic criticism, however, it is important to recognize that the regulatory strategies which her work also supplied made her writing particularly attractive to those reviewers who were suspicious of most other contemporary fictions. From *A Sicilian Romance* (1790) onwards, as I argue, Radcliffe offered forms of supplementary material which were calculated to dignify or elevate the reputation of romance itself. Radcliffe sought to temper the absorption that her work fostered in its readers, by appealing to the discourse of aesthetics, and by providing long and digressive passages of natural description enhanced with references to current theories of the sublime and the beautiful. Most famously, Radcliffe framed the role of sensation and suspense in her work by explaining away the supernatural, a move which was widely equated with a rejection of 'delusion' and a recovery of the rule of law. In *The Italian* (1797) especially, Radcliffe clearly took account of the criticism levelled at contemporaries such as Lewis, and sought to reinstate some of the more innocent properties of the romance genre. Contemporary commentators endorsed the 'exceptionalist' status of Radcliffe's work, I go on to argue, by appealing to her biography and to her profile as an author; critics presented information about Radcliffe's distance from the taint of the present in order to claim that her works could be safely consumed by whoever read them.

Radcliffe's reputation in the 1790s and early 1800s was sustained by the critical consensus that her work provided a legitimate form of 'transport' in a period of obvious national crisis. Despite the initial acclaim with which Radcliffe's work was greeted, however, the praise it

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received was significantly qualified, and authoritative male critics emphasized that Radcliffe was only successful in a minor and relatively unimportant genre. From the early nineteenth century onwards, indeed, the criteria by which Radcliffe's works were judged became more and more demanding. My fifth and final chapter deals with the subsequent status of Radcliffean romance, and of 'the Gothic' in general, via the retrospect offered by Walter Scott and the Waverley novels. After a brief discussion of the reception of Scott's early poetry, inspired by the success of Lewis, I focus on the diverse ways in which Scott positioned himself and his work in relation to the field of prose romance. As a critic and as a novelist, Scott defined the bulk of contemporary fiction in terms of confinement and limit, so as to clear a space in which he could emerge – anonymity notwithstanding – as a revitalizing presence. Although, as I argue, Scott's digestion of the Gothic romance was less complete than some accounts of his groundbreaking impact assume, the Waverley novels were initially celebrated because of the way that they synthesized romance and history, and offered the best of both worlds. During his lifetime at least, Scott was widely praised for putting paid to the perceived immaturity of the Gothic romance, since his own works were regarded to be both more romantic and more historically plausible than those which had preceded them, and since his novels served to draw their readers away from the private absorption fostered by romance and reconnect them to the communal space of history and public life.

Such an 'evolutionary' reading of the Waverley novels, of course, is clearly liable to impose an artificial closure on any account of the Gothic, and to imply that the Gothic romance somehow eventually gave way to the true genius displayed by Scott's work. An account of the genre which proceeds from Radcliffe to Scott, moreover, has to bypass a great deal of what happened to the Gothic in the early nineteenth century, and ignore the influential ways in which the vocabulary of the genre was constructed by writers such as Mary Shelley, Charles Maturin, and James Hogg. Pressure of space dictates that this book has little to say about the 'wave of neo- and retro-Gothic experiments' heralded by *Frankenstein* (1818), *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), and *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), and little to say about – to give just a few examples – the subgenre of the 'Irish Gothic', the connections between the Gothic and the emergent 'Godwinian' novel, or the revival of German literary influence in the tales published by *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.[16] If omissions inevitably result, however,

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